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FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8186
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1944
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON PRIORITY 2742

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000086

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/21/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: LOCAL GOVERNMENT MINISTER LIKELY TO BE KEY PLAYER
IN NEW GOVERNMENT

REF: DHAKA 78

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1.(C) Local Government Minister Syed Ashraful (Ashraf) Islam told Ambassador Moriarty on 1/20 he was committed to decentralizing political power, improving governance, and pushing democratic reform. His enthusiasm for improving Bangladesh's dysfunctional democracy is important because he is likely to wield much political influence both as head of a large ministry and as spokesman for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League. Ashraf has maintained close contact with the Embassy's Political Section, and he told the Ambassador he looked forward to a strong relationship in the years ahead.

CALMING THE OPPOSITION, CALMING THE STUDENTS

12. (C) Ashraf is one of the few top Awami League leaders to enter Prime Minister Hasina's Cabinet. While Hasina languished in jail on graft charges during much of the 2007-08 Caretaker Government, Ashraf held her fractured political party together as acting general secretary. He also was a key Awami League interlocutor with the military Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, which played an active role in negotiating Bangladesh's return to democracy during the Caretaker Government. In wide-ranging discussions with PolOffs at the time, Ashraf frequently spoke of the need to rid Bangladeshi politics of violence, corruption, and its winner-take-all ethos. Sheikh Hasina named Ashraf Awami League spokesman after she returned to active leadership of the party in November 2008, and then rewarded him for his loyalty with the post of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives Minister. That Ministry is responsible for more than a quarter of the national budget. The combination of government and party positions will likely keep Ashraf at the nexus of power in the new administration.

13. (C) Despite his new responsibilities running a huge ministry, Ashraf told Ambassador Moriarty he continued to spend much of his time on party policy and internal matters. He stressed the importance of giving the rival Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which ran the country from 2001-2006, a meaningful role in government even though it won only about 10 percent of the Parliament seats in the December 29 election. He said the BNP would get a number of committee chairmanships proportionate to its representation in the new Parliament, including leadership of some important committees. Although he did not provide specifics, Ashraf noted opposition parties traditionally were offered the chairmanship of the Public Accounts Committee, which acts as the budget watchdog. Ashraf said he also was encouraging the

BNP to participate in debates in Parliament; in the past, opposition parties often boycotted Parliament sessions.

14. (C) In his role as a senior party leader, Ashraf also is trying to stop violence by members of the Awami League student wing that has erupted on several college campuses since the election. Ashraf said he spoke with the wing's two top leaders earlier that morning and would hold a news conference to urge calm. He said party leaders, who were exhausted from the election campaign and forming the new government, had not been quick enough to address the campus violence; still, he maintained the situation was "gradually" coming under control.

CONTINUING THE CARETAKER GOVERNMENT REFORMS

15. (C) Ashraf expected Parliament would approve nearly all of the ordinances passed by the Caretaker Government. (Note: Many of the ordinances provide a framework for improved local governance, democratic reforms and decentralized government. Others strengthen Bangladesh's legal framework for fighting money laundering and terrorism. End note.) Although an advisory committee formed by the new government recommended scrapping many of the 122 ordinances passed during Caretaker Government rule, Ashraf said he expected they would all be approved by Parliament with only some "slight tinkering here and there." (Note: Major General (retired) Tarique Ahmed Siddique, a Cabinet minister without portfolio who advises on military and security matters, also told PolOff and Datt on 1/19 that Sheikh Hasina was inclined to pass the ordinances.

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End note.) Ashraf noted one local government ordinance might be amended to ensure that Parliament members would have a role advising the upazillas (counties) on development projects. He admitted that the MPs had no desire to see their previous authority over development decentralized to the new upazila governments.

STRENGTHENING CIVIL-MILITARY TIES

16. (C) The only Local Government Ministry program Ashraf mentioned at length was the "One House, One Garden" project that uses soldiers to build houses for homeless people. He said the program was a great success during the previous 1996-2001 Awami League government and would help improve relations between the military and general population. Ashraf said strengthening ties between the civilian government and the military, along with depoliticizing the military, would be a key goal of the new administration. He said the Awami League would keep its election manifesto promise to appoint only the chiefs of the three services and allow all other military promotions to be internal decisions.

COMMENT: A PARTNER IN PUSHING DEMOCRACY

17. (C) Ashraf is perhaps the likeliest partner within the new government to push democratic reform which, along with development and denying space to terrorists, comprises the three "D"s of USG policy in Bangladesh. In numerous conversations with EmbOffs over many months, he consistently spoke in favor of improving governance in Bangladesh and he told the Ambassador he appreciated the efforts by the USG-funded International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute to promote democracy in Bangladesh. As head of a top ministry and a senior leader of the Awami League, Ashraf appears to be in a unique position to push policies to strengthen the democratic underpinnings of this young, predominantly Muslim country of 150 million people.

